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From the illustrated history: No history of rock 'n' roll could be complete without (from left) Chuck Berry in a classic pose, the ultimately stylish Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps (circa 1956), a young and trying-very-hard Dylan, a flamboyant Jimi Hendrix, and a fascinatingly unfathomable Phil Spector.

Rock well chronicled in new burst of books

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
For The Gazette

Remember the days not so long ago (four or five years back) when the big "legitimate" book companies were loathe to publish anything about rock 'n' roll music? Those days are definitely over; today it seems there's not enough you can print about rock, especially since it's the top consumer entertainment. If you can't beat them . . . and so there is a glut of cheapo biographies of Alice Cooper, Kiss, Paul McCartney, David Bowie and the rest, as well as expensively produced but empty picture-and-text tomes.

There are dramatic exceptions, however, beginning with the biggest, heaviest, most carefully written and lavishly illustrated book on rock yet: *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock 'n' Roll*, edited by Jim Miller and designed by Robert Kingsbury (Random House, 382 pages, $11.50).

The original premise of *Rolling Stone* magazine, when it began in 1967, was to treat popular music seriously and, despite some lows and some near blasé music reporting, it has made good on its promise.

The book is a loose chronology of all the major groups, innovators and trends of the past 25 years, charted in essays by some of the most reliable rock critics around, including Greil Marcus, Ellen Willis, Robert Palmer, Langdon Winner, Greg Shaw, Nik Cohn, Ed Ward, Lester Bangs, Paul Nelson and Jonathon Cott.

Complementing the usually perceptive and thoughtful pieces, are superbly representative photos on the king-size pages. Rare promo shots, candid stage scenes, record cover art — all chosen with love and the intelligence to back it up.

Some younger fans might complain that the newer phenoms are not represented adequately, but this is a volume of lavish perspective; it does not deal with those who have yet to earn their spurs. Still, there's mention of just about everybody of remote consequence here (as well as discographies and, a neat touch, the highest sales chart positions of countless discs). Two curious oversights, however: Separate chapters are not afforded to Simon and Garfunkel and Frank Zappa.

The contemporary scene as it is unfolding is covered equally well in another *Rolling Stone* anthology, their best yet, entitled *What's That Sound*, edited by Ben Fong-Torres (Anchor/Doubleday, 426 pages, $3.95). Here the reporters and chroniclers take over with on-the-spot reports of the grand heroes in their nights of triumph, and their moments of despair and limbo. The writers include Ralph J. Gleason, Pete Hamill, Nat Hentoff, editor Fong-Torres, and others. The success of this collection of reportage comes from the ability of the writers to relate the atmosphere of their subjects in a personal style.

There are three Beatles in limbo. Dylan on his Rolling Thunder return to fame. The Band making its debut in San Francisco's Winterland, Patti Smith in the bloom from underground to star, moving interviews with Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder, comically revealing talks with Paul Simon, Neil Young, and Eric Clapton (the hang-ups of the stars: The Clapton transcript reveals the inside gossip behind the searing classic *Layla* recording — stealing Patti Boyd away from his best pal George Harrison). The chats with Peter Townshend and Elton John are unstirring because these stars can't see beyond their noses; on the whole, however, *What's That Sound* reveals at least some of the intimacies of the big names in the act of creation or just in the act.

The distinguished British musicologist and critic Wilfrid Mellers is responsible for the most unusual, idiosyncratic volume published on rock since Richard Meltzer's *Aesthetics of Rock* — a study, in musical terms, of the Beatles' songs, entitled *Twilight of the Gods, The Beatles in Retrospect* (Faber, 215 pages, $5.85).

Mellers' serious tone verges on self-parody most of the way, as the Beatles didn't know how to write music, stole many riffs and harmonies from their heroes, and often in later years purposely wrote ambiguous, obscure lyrics to put on the critics. But there's nothing wrong with Mellers' approach, as he himself explains:

"The fact that a Beatle . . . has never heard of a dominant seventh or a mediant relationship or whatever, is neither here nor there; people who live and work in 'oral' traditions have no need critically to rationalise about what they are doing. Of course it is possible to argue that all discussion of and writing about music is a waste of time. I've occasionally come near to saying this myself. However, if this is true, it applies to all discussion of music equally: analysis of Beethoven is no less irrelevant than analysis of Beatles."

Thus, the first complete and reliable criticism of some of the most popular music ever created. As a companion to listening to Beatles discs, the volume is invaluable and a lot of fun. To wit:

"Whether or not Paul approved of the plush scoring of *The long and winding road*, it works not because it guys the feeling but because the feeling has integrity. The music has tremendous expectancy, created partly by the delayed appearance of the tonic (though they key is E major, we start with a modal C sharp minor and modulate flatwards to A before cadencing in E)

The amateur actors have asked for it!

It's been our policy to review only professional productions, those in which the actors are paid, allowing a sole exception for the work of the National Theatre School.

We've now decided to amend that policy to include the city's two other professional acting schools, Dawson College, with its Dome Theatre, and John Abbott College's theatre school on a first-night basis.

However, because of the varied quality and often irregular scheduling of other student productions, they will not be reviewed on an opening-night basis, but rather in capsule summaries in this weekly column.

John Abbott College this week opened its second production of the season, Thornton Wilder's apocalyptic post-Second World War satire, *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

Abbott has been among the groups pressing most strongly to be reviewed on a professional basis, but, judging from this production (it has done better work in the past), that would be mercilessly unfair.

The 24 students (not including student technical staff) in the second and third years of the acting program have put a lot of time and effort into this play.

But to no avail. The production is manic-depressive, irritable and inconsistent. It is much too busy. One longs to turn off the stimuli, not sort them out. It is an extreme production of an extreme play and the general impression is of disorder handled with minimal discipline.

In reviewing this production, the tendency is to try to protect the students, who cannot be held responsible for the choice of the play or its manner of production.

But they must sometime face the shock of being flung out into a tough and competitive job market, and one can only hope they are not being misled about the level of their training.

Certainly in projection and voice control they are not on a par with Dome or the National Theatre School students. They generally seem to lack the grit of the inner-city school students, maintaining an innocence which clashes with Wilder's cynical lines.

Gaetan Charlebois, Jennifer Crowley and Rene Barinet in the John Abbott College production of Thornton Wilder's play The Skin of Our Teeth.

Theatre Notes

By Julia Maskoulis

In the future, greater care should be given to the selection of plays to keep these limitations in mind — at the very least. Otherwise there is a great danger they will only become embittered by the critical reaction.

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Medium Soignant (Recruited), Francoise Loranger's grouchy treatise on Quebec liberation, has ruffled some feathers over at Place des Arts, where it has been playing for the past month and has been the cause of some concern to its producer Jean Duceppe.

Duceppe called a press conference this week to ask that two highly critical articles published by *The Montreal Star* be retracted.

The articles were inspired by complaints to PdA management that billboards erected outside the Theatre Port Royal for audience comments drew offensive remarks about English and immigrant Canadians.

La Compagnie Jean Duceppe customarily tries to elicit audience response to its productions, and this is not the first time boards have been up. But they remained throughout all the different productions at TPR, and the substance of some of the remarks, which range from political to foul to poetic, have aroused the anger of visitors to other productions.

Duceppe felt that the English did not understand the "cathartic" nature of these remarks, hence the press conference.

A man of repute in Quebecois entertainment, Duceppe is not known for staging political plays and said *Medium* was chosen for its heavyweight standards to balance some of his other choices this year, including a French version of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and the Russian comedy, *Je veux voir Mioussov*.

Coincidentally, or perhaps not, *Medium Saignant* was timed to open mid-way through the Quebec provincial election and partially due to that fact and to the hot nature of the political scene these days, the play has become the company's biggest success to date, surpassing the current record-holder *Charlemagne et le chef*.

The play has performed to 97-per-cent-capacity audiences in the 836 seat TPR every night since it opened Nov. 4. And since the Parti Quebecois victory Nov. 15 it has been sold out every night.

Consequently, its run has been extended until Dec. 18, following which the show will go on a tour to St. Jerome, Chicoutimi, Quebec City, Sherbrooke, Rimouski and Jonquiere for two to four night runs.

It then returns to PdA on Jan. 25 for 15 days and again in May. Duceppe's other production, which was to have succeeded it this week, is the delightful *Je veux voir Mioussov* which was presented at Theatre des Prairies in Joliette this summer. It will open Jan. 8 and run to 30.

Meanwhile, the billboards remain outside TPR, but they have been draped during other presentations, so that non-French viewers will not be offended.

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This is a busy weekend in theatre, starting last night with the second presentation of the Quebec Drama Festival at the Centaur. Moliere's *A Doctor in Spite of Himself* will be followed by *The Killing of Sister George* this evening. Adjudicator Herbert Whittaker will present the awards after tonight's performance.

The Atheatrical Co. is presenting an evening of one-act plays at Powerhouse Performance Space. The group's third production runs until Dec. 19. The plays are: *The Death of Ivi Parker* by Ann Jeffrey-Sudderman; *Rag Doll* by Paul LeDoux; and *Henrik Ibsen on the Necessity of Producing Norwegian Theatre* by John Palmer.

La Poudriere is presenting a Spanish play called *La Doble Historia Del Doctor Valmy*, running until Dec. 18.

The play, written by Buero Vallejo, deals with universal themes — good, evil, love, violence and torture. It is about an employee in the political police whose family discovers his "true professional activities."

The National Arts Centre in Ottawa is presenting, beginning Monday for a limited run of six nights, Michel Tremblay's *Hosanna*. The current production, which recently played to sold-out houses and rave reviews at Vancouver East Cultural Centre, is a remounting of a show first directed by Tarragon Theatre's Bill Glasco in 1974.

This is probably a landmark, as it is the closest to Montreal a Tremblay play has been performed in English, and it is the first English version of Tremblay to be presented at the NAC.

Other openings: Dawson's Dome Theatre presents *Lion's Labour Lost* Dec. 14 to 21. National Theatre School presents *Je Teme ou le BbGueGueGueMan*, by Raoul Duguay, Dec. 14 to 18. *Equus* by Peter Schaffer is at Theatre Maisonneuve (PdA) Dec. 15 to 19; and Theatre du Nouveau Monde opens with George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* Dec. 17 to Jan. 29; and Group of Four at John Abbott College presents Jerome Kilty's *Dear Liar*, about George Bernard Shaw and Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Dec. 17, 18, 19 and 21 with a matinee on the 19th.

Tomorrow at 3 p.m. the Centaur is having a teach-in on *Anatol*. Admission is free and the public is invited to meet the cast and the director. Refreshments will be served. *Anatol* is playing at Centaur 2 until Dec. 19.

SPIN OFF

Stale single Beatles

In the old days, you could always count on a new Beatles record for Christmas. This year, three of the four disbanded Beatles have brand-new records out; you've got to be a confirmed fan to put up with the staleness of these shadowy performances.

Paul McCartney's is the surefire hit, of course. His **Wings Over America** tour last summer was a smash success, and this three-disc set is the souvenir (on Capitol). There is something perverse about the over-30 "cute" Beatle trying to act cute again for the fans (squeals and screams, muted or not, are heard in the background throughout). He's not cute anymore, only coy and unabashedly sentimental. His sentimentality, however, is self-righteous and defensive in tone and panders so much to the "common denominator" of sweetness and romance that he winds up sounding syrupy and even complacent.

When he sings uptempo rockers like *Lady Madonna* he only sounds huffy-puffy; the tempo is glaringly slower than the original, and no matter how he tries to inject pathos into the rendering it still sounds like he's trying to hold down the tune. Similarly, *Blackbird*, a light piece of fluff on the eclectic Beatles *White* album, comes across as only prosaic here.

Wings as a band runs on its own energy — always guided by the fawning Paul and Linda McCartney, her simplistic keyboard fillips stick out like a sore thumb — but it doesn't have much personality, the group is a foil for McCartney's rancid sweetness.

Meanwhile, George Harrison is flaunting a "comeback" album, entitled **33 and ⅓** (Dark Horse/Warners), which happens to be the age at which he recorded this desperately hopeful piece of vinyl. In the press info that accompanies the new release, George openly admits that his previous **Extra Texture** album "caught me in a depressing mood". It didn't sell much either and scared away a sizable number of fans — thus, this "happy, upbeat" record.

The trouble is that George Harrison has never had anything of significance to tell us, except vague drivings about love and the cosmic profundity of life, etcetera. This "new direction" and its propellant positive vibrations are nothing new, and seem meant more as a selling point rather than revelation. It comes through in the blandness of the music.

Perhaps if Warners had released *33 and ⅓* together with the recorded media-info "conversation" with George where he explains each precious little moaning of the songs — including a boring harrangue on his trial for "stealing" *My Sweet Lord* from an oldie (he had to pay $140,000) — fans might've had something more tangible to dig into.

Ringo Starr's **Rotogravure** (Atlantic) is not much different from his other solo efforts, despite the lovely production by Arif Mardin and cameo performances from various friends. Ringo is just baleful and well-meaning to make his music something to hang onto. His personality was needed to buoy the strong egos of the other Beatles; on his own, he drifts seemingly without purpose. *Rotogravure* is not offensive, but it is still a caricature in search of character.

— JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Colleen's first misses mark

Popular Ontario singer-songwriter Colleen Peterson has finally done her first album. Called **Beginning To Feel Like Home** (Capitol), the album was done in Nashville and is a competent and enjoyable performance of 10 songs. The problem with this record is that it could have been much better than it is.

Peterson is a fine songwriter, yet for some reason either she or her producer decided to concentrate on well known material, limiting her original compositions to two songs.

That works fine for something like Willie P. Bennett's lovely *Music In Your Eyes* but most of the other songs have already had definitive versions sung by more established interpreters. For instance, her version of *Rutland Womens Blues* doesn't approach the sexiness of Maria Muldaur's early cover or the humor of Mississippi John Hurt's original.

Some of her interpretations miss the point of the songs' lyrics. Willie Nelson's *Sad Songs And Waltzes* is an example. Peterson makes lyrics that say, "sad songs and waltzes aren't selling this year" sound easily salable. On the same score she reverses the sexual references of Jesse Winchester's *Brand New Tennessee Waltz*, making it into a woman's song. Much of the emotion of that song is in the knowledge that it's a draft dodger's lament. When Joan Baez recorded it she had the good sense not to change the gender of the song's narrator.

The best cuts on this record are the two Peterson originals. Of particular note is a fine country song called *Souvenirs*.

Peterson is a good singer and a strong live performer. With better direction she could make exceptional rather than just competent records.

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Jesse Winchester takes a long time between albums, usually about two years. When a new Winchester record makes its appearance we're reminded that this Montrealer is among the best singer-songwriters on the scene today.

Let The Rough Side Drag (Bearsville) is his fourth album and there is no radical departure from the Winchester traditions established on his earlier works. The lyrics are finely crafted and wrapped in beautifully simple melodies. His deep Tennessee drawl is cupped by arrangements that are as bare or as full as the individual song demands.

As with all Winchester records appreciation for this one grows with each listen. On the first time around cuts such as *Damned If You Do, Log Drace, Your Burden* and a new arrangement of *Brand New Tennessee Waltz* stand out. These are all country-tinged tunes that Winchester is particularly good at.

On the second spin you notice the more up tempo country songs. They include the title song, *Let the Rough Side Drag* and *Blow On Chilly Winds*. By the third listening rockers such as *Everybody Knows But Me* and *It Takes More Than A Hammer And Nails To Make A House A Home* are also standing out, to the point that everything flows together into the successful album that this is.

— MIKE REGENSTREIF

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